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Turf war gears up on auto service; Private bill; Gives consumers a choice

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Byline: DAVE HALL
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A battle is brewing in the automotive sector over a private member's bill designed to protect hundreds of thousands of jobs in the automotive aftermarket and guarantee consumers the right to choose where to have their vehicles serviced.

Supported by the Automotive Industries Association of Canada - and opposed by automakers and their dealers - the bill sponsored by Brian Masse, a New Democrat MP from Windsor, Ont., is in its second reading and is expected to be debated in the House of Commons on May 11.

With today's vehicles becoming more and more sophisticated and automakers and dealers becoming more protective of their diagnostic tools, repair manuals and software, consumers are often left with no choice but to return to their dealer for service.

Masse's bill seeks to amend the Canadian Environmental Protection Act and the Competition Act in order to guarantee independent auto service shops access to service information, tools and training.

"If this information is not made available, the negative impact on the aftermarket segment of the automotive industry in terms of the economy and jobs will be significant," Masse said. "Given the current climate, collaboration from all parties on this bill is simply responsible governance."

Masse said a similar system exists in the U.S. that gives consumers a choice and "you shouldn't have one system in place in the U.S. and another in Canada. It can't be justified."

Compounding the problem for consumers is the fact a declaration of bankruptcy from either General Motors Corp. or Chrysler LLC could have a massive effect on their respective dealer networks throughout Canada and the United States.

Those who oppose the bill say a lack of training, technology, experience and infrastructure in the aftermarket sector, and the possibility of stolen technology, make the bill impractical.

Automakers also say they should be able to determine how and to whom they distribute their parts, and that consumers have a closer relationship to their dealers than to other automobile service providers.

Michael Hatch, a senior economist for the Canadian

Automobile Dealers Association, said his group is actively lobbying against the bill.

"We believe automakers and dealers should be able to decide voluntarily what information to make available," Hatch said. "Much of it is already available on websites and through subscriptions.

"We don't think it's fair or practical to force automakers to divulge intellectual property that cost them billions of dollars to develop," Hatch said. "In addition, we've had no complaints from consumers about dealership repairs."

Masse said he'd heard from opposition groups and added there will be time to work out any problems before the bill becomes law.

"There's a process in place to protect intellectual property, and if it can be shown with any degree of certainty that there are drawbacks, we will deal with them," Masse said.

He added the bill has received considerable support from consumer groups and also from across party lines.

Supporters of the bill point out it would have no effect on warranty work, which would still be carried out in dealer service shops.

But other service work would be completed at a service shop of the consumer's choice, providing the diagnostic tools and information necessary to carry out the repairs are made available.

According to a survey conducted by the Automotive Aftermarket Industry Association, "vehicle repairs cost an average of 34 per cent more at new-car dealerships than at independent repair shops."

It's estimated there are more than 400,000 jobs in the automotive aftermarket.